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ABSTRACT

The silence between two people's utterances during conversation is referred to as a juncture pause and the outcome of events at the juncture pause determines who will speak next in a conversation. A study explored the nature of interruptions in young children's conversation and examined whether turn-taking repair occurred after an interruption and if so, how it was accomplished. Subjects included preschool children ranging in age from 4 to 5 years. The children were observed in dyads as they played in a private room at their day care center for approximately 20 to 25 minutes. Altogether there were approximately 6 hours of natural conversation taped and within this time, 25 instances of interruption occurred. Results showed the female-male dyad had the highest rate of interruptions, with one occuring every 9.50 minutes. The next highest rate of interruptions per minute was every 26.60 minutes by the female-female group and the lowest was one every 80 minutes by the male-male dyad. The most prevalent type of interruption involved adding a statement that was specifically or generally relevant to the topic. Children dealt with being interrupted primarily by abandoning their own utterance and responding to the interrupter's utterance. Finally, there appeared to be no discernible relationship between the types of interruptions used by children in conversation and the types of responses given. (HOD)

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Interruptions in children's conversation:

Does talk break down?

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Interruptions in Children's Conversation:

Does Talk Break Down?

The aim of this paper is to explore the nature of interruptions in young children's conversation and to determine whether turn-taking repair occurs after an interruption and if so, how it is accomplished. Do children continue to converse after they are interrupted and how is the timing error handled? Is there a model that describes the way children resume turn-taking, if indeed they do?

Conversation, at its most basic, is a sequence of sounds and silences (Siegman and Feldstein, 1979). The sounds of conversation are emitted by people talking and are separated by silences or pauses within one conversant's stream of speech and between two conversants' utterances. The silence between two people's utterances during conversation is referred to as a "juncture pause" and the outcome of events at the juncture pause determines who will speak next in a conversation. The focus of this study is on behavior at the juncture pause and the sequence of actions occurring in the absence of a typical juncture pause.

Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) describe conversation in their model for the organization of turn-taking. The sequential nature of talk among people is observed as one person talks at a time and speaker change occurs and recurs. Sacks et al. discuss turn-taking regulation and they focus on what happens at juncture pauses to allocate speaker turns. It is proposed that conversants are equipped with a fine-tuned perceptual device, projection, which allows prediction of utterance termination and then immediate initiation of the next speaker's utterance. Conversants are surprisingly accurate at the timing involved in ending and initiating speech

as this process occurs within milliseconds. Errors in timing do occur and Sacks et al. have accounted for the occasional overlap of speaking turns in their model. Typically at some point in conversation, a conversant will speak out of turn while a speaker has the floor. This is an instance of interruption and Sacks et al. claim that repair mechanisms for interruption are intrinsic to their turn-taking model.

METHOD

Subjects

The children in this study were all attending a day care center in souther Connecticut. Half of the 36 children were girls, half were boys and their age range was from 4 years 1 month to 5 years old. Each child was randomly assigned to one of three groups: female-female group (4 dyads), female-male group (10 dyads) and male-male group (4 dyads). all the children were from middle class homes.

Procedure

The children were observed in dyads as they played in a private room at their day care center for approximately 20 to 25 minutes. Toys were provided for the children and they were instructed to play together sharing the available toys. A female experimenter sat in the back of the room and tape recorded the children's conversations as well as noted activity and context. It was explained to the children that the experimenter who sat in the back of the room was not to be disturbed unless it was important.

After each dyad was seen, the audiotape was transcribed and matched with the appropriate activity and context. All instances of interruption wre noted and analyzed according to the classification system shown in Table 1. An interruption was functionally defined as an instance where one speaker cuts off more than one word of another speaker's utterance (Zimmerman and West,

1975). Slight overlaps of speech involving only one word were not considered interruptions. Reliability was checked by an independent adult and the result was 90 percent agreement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first objective of this study was to determine the frequency of interruptions in the young children's conversations. There were 18 conversations recorded between pairs of children lasting about 20 to 25 minutes each. Altogether this included approximately six hours of natural conversation and within this time 25 instances of interruption occurred. Thus, a general frequency estimate of one interruption in 14.40 minutes was obtained for young boys and girls in conversation.

It should be noted that these conversations were between peers; children of nearly equal age and status. The frequency estimate of one interruption in 14.40 miutes must be considered in light of the presumed equity between the conversants. In dyads where there is a superordinate and subordinate conversant the frequency estimate may differ.

Conversation between young children is not likely to be sustained for a period of time as long as 20 to 25 minutes without hiatus and the data generated here do indeed show gaps in the flow of talk. All the children in this study interacted together or played with common toys during the 20 to 25 minutes but talk was not constant and evenly spaced. Therefore, it should be kept in mind the frequency estimate of one interruption in 14.40 minutes is not based on continual talk for the six hour duration of recording. The average number of speaking turns per subject for the 20 -25 minute time period was 33.20.

The frequency estimates are different when observed by the three dyadic pair combinations. The female-male dyad showed the highest rate with one

interruption occurring every 9.50 minutes. The next highest rate of interruptions per minute was one every 26.60 minutes by the female-female group and the lowest was one interruption every 80 minutes by the male-male dyad. These data are consistent with previous research on sex differences and interruptions (Zimmerman and West, 1975; Esposito, 1979).

The second aim of this study was to explore the types of interruptions used by young children in conversation. There are a variety of circumstances under which one child might break into the speech of another child and there are different ways a child might accomplish this. One type of interruption is a statement inserted into a speaker's utterance that is directly relevant to the message of the utterance and this was one of the most commong types (44%). See Table 1 for a classification of types of interruptions.

An example of an interruption that is directly relevant to the message of the uterance is presented below. Child A and child B are playing together with a Cookie Monster doll and they are pretending to eat cookies.

Example 1

A: (holds doll and reaches to B's nose)
I eat your nose.

B: Yuck. (pretends to give doll a cookie)
He's gonna eat...

A: (interrupts, uses the doll's voice) I'm gonna eat my cookies all up.

B: (refers to self) I'm gonna eat mine too.

In this instance it is clear that child A's interruption is directly relevant to child B's specific reference to the doll eating cookies. Relevancy here refers to shared meaning with a joint focus on the same context, object and activities. Equally prevalent was the type of interruption that was not directly relevant to the interrupted person's utterance but generally

relevant to the topic at hand (44%).

An instance of this type of interruption follows. Child A and child B are sitting near each other talking about traveling and visiting various areas.

Example 2

A: I want to go to the park (pause) and to see Freddy Bisher.

B: And my mommy's gonna take me and Mimi and we...

A: (interrupts) Then I'm going to Florida.

B: and we're going far away.

From this it is evident that the topic of "traveling and visiting" is maintained by child A in her interruption; however, direct relevancy to child B's utterance is abandoned. Child A does not ? B's Mommy, Mimi or where they are going, rather she introduces a new idea about going to Florida.

The vast majority of the children's interruptions (88%) involve a statement that is either directly or generally relevant to the ongoing talk. This suggests that young children's interruptions tend not to change the topic nor deviate from shared meaning: in fact, they stay with the meaning of the conversation in spit of the hiatus. The interruptions centered specifically on the speaker's message or the mutually constructed message. Although there is a break in the timing flow of the talk there seems to be no break in the meaning flow for the most part. It is important to note the interruptions usually consisted of an utterance that contributed meaningfully to the topic of conversation and thereby facilitated it. The next most prevalent type of interruption (8%) involved questions that were relevant to B's utterance. This further supports claim that children's interruptions tend to be meaningfully related to the topic of conversation. Only 4% of the children's interruptions were totally irrelevant to the point being made and to the

general topic.

Children's interruptions may be viewed as an intrusion into a conversant's talk which is a violation of the turn-taking system proposed by Sacks et al. However intrusive the act of interrupting may be, the message offered by the children in this study when interrupting tended to facilitate the ongoing conversation. There is evidence accumulating which suggests young children act to share meaning and keep the talk going in conversation (Mueller, 1972; Garvey, 1973; Rees, 1978). To further support the notion that young children cooperate to generate mutually understood conversation, inspection of children's responses to being interrupted was undertaken. The third objective of this study attempts to elucidate the types of responses given by children to being interrupted by peers in conversation. How do young children cope with an intrusion into their flow of speech? Clearly, the efficacy of dealing with an interruption can be determined by whether talk continues or breaks down.

The interrupted child's (B) response was most likely to include stopping, waiting for the interrupter (A) to finish and the responding to A's utterance while abandoning his own. The interrupted speaker behaved in this way 32% of the time. See example 1 above for an illustration of this type of response to interruption. From this, it seems as though children are most frequently willing to keep the conversation going by abandoning their utterance for at least the time being and maybe forever, in order to tune into the co-conversant's message. This is certainly in line with studies emphasizing children's sociocentric capacities in conversation (Rees, 1978).

Twenty-four percent of the time the children who were interrupted waited for A to finish their interruption and then resumed the same utterance from the interrupted point. To continue speaking after being interrupted indicates

some willingness to maintain communication despite the turn-taking violation. An equally likely alternative to interruption may be to stop talking for at least a brief period of time and this did in fact occur 16% of the time. Cessation of speech after interruption has been viewed as a form of surrender from an attack (Zimmerman and West, 1975). A rather egocentric response to interruption did occur 12% of the time and it involved simultaneous speech; the interrupted person chose not to give up the floor while the interrupter continued to speak. At this point, the Sacks et al. model of turn-taking proposed that after interruption delay and simultaneous speech, self selection for the next possible turn occurs, either the interrupter or the interrupted party can choose to speak next.

It is interesting to note that there were no instances of talking about the interruptions by either speaker. Young children may not be as competent at using language to analyze previous conversational events and discuss the dynamics of their own interaction (Blank, 1973). The interrupted speaker, B, could comment on being interrupted immediately or after A completes his turn or A could excuse himself for interrupting. There was no evidence of any of the above discussion as shown in Table 1. Sacks et al. suggest talking about the turn-taking error, interruptions, using rules of etiquette such as saying, "Excuse me," "I'm sorry," or "Go ahead." The child who was interrupted could have responded with "Don't interrupt," "Let me finish," or "Wait." However, the children in this study showed no behavior of this sort.

The final aim of this study includes exploration of the relationship between types of interruptions and types of responses. Did one type of interruption produce a reliable response to it by young children? Under these circumstances there appeared to be no discernible relationship between the types of interruptions used by children in conversation and the types of

responses given. It is possible that observation of larger numbers of children's interruptions will reveal some pattern or trend not visible here.

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Table 1
Classification of Interruptions and Responses

Types of Interruptions	Percent Responses
1. A statement relevant to B's* utterance	44%
2. A statement not relevant to B's utterance directly but generally relevant to the topic	44%
3. A totally irrelevant statement	4%
4. A question relevant to B's utterance	8%
5. A question not relevant to B's utterance directly but generally relevant to the topic	0
6. A question totally irrelevant	0

Types of responses to interruptions	Percent Responses
1. B stops, waits for A, then responds to A's utterance while abandoning own	32%
2. B stops, waits for A, then resumes same utterance from interrupted spot	24%
3. B stops, waits for A, then begins same utterance again	0
4. B stops, waits for A, then resumes new related utterance	8%
5. B stops, waits for A, then resumes new unrelated utterance	8%
6. B stops, then interrupts A with the same utterance	0
7. B stops, does not speak again for 5 seconds or more	16%
8. B stops, comments on being interrupted	0
9. Simultaneous speech occurs: A and B both continue	12%
10. B comments on being interrupted immediately	0
11. B stops, A excuses self for interrupting	0

*B refers to the conversant who was interrupted
A refers to the conversant who did the interrupting